

GEORGE¹

BY STACY AUMONIER

THERE was something essentially Chinese about the appearance of George as he lay there propped up against the pillows. His large, flabby face had an expression of complete detachment. His narrowing eyes regarded me with a fatalistic repose. Observing him I felt that nothing mattered, nothing ever had mattered, and nothing ever would matter. And I was angry. Pale sunlight filtered through the curtains.

'Good Lord!' I exclaimed. 'Still in bed! Do you know it's nearly twelve o'clock?'

An almost inaudible sigh greeted my explosion. George occupied the maisonnette below me. Some fool of an uncle had left him a small private income, and he lived alone, attended by an old housekeeper. He did nothing, absolutely nothing at all, not even amuse himself; and whenever I went in to see him he was invariably in bed. There was nothing wrong with his health. It was sheer laziness. But not laziness of a negative kind, mark you, but the outcome of a calm and studied policy. I knew this, and it angered me the more.

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'What would happen if the whole world went on like you?' I snapped.

He sighed again, and then replied in his thin, mellow voice: —

'We should have a series of ideal states. There would be no wars, no crimes, no divorce, no competition, no greed, envy, hatred, or malice.'

'Yes, and no food.'

He turned slightly on one side. His accents became mildly expostulating — the philosopher fretted by an ignorant child.

'How unreasonable you are, dear boy. How unthinking! The secret of life is complete immobility. The tortoise lives four hundred years; the fox terrier wears itself out in ten. Wild beasts, fishes, savages, and stockbrokers fight and struggle and eat each other up. The only place for a cultivated man is bed. In bed he is supreme — the arbiter of his soul. His limbs and the vulgar carcass of his being constructed for purely material functioning are concealed. His head rules him. He is the autocrat of the bolster, the gallant of fine linen, the master of complete relaxation. Believe me, there are a thousand tender attitudes of repose unknown to people like you. The four

corners of a feather bed are an inexhaustible field of luxurious adventure. I have spent more than half my life in bed, and even now I have not explored all the delectable crannies and comforts that it holds for me.'

'No,' I sneered. 'And in the meantime, other people have to work to keep you there.'

'That is not my fault. A well-ordered state should be a vast caravansary of dormitories. Ninety-nine per cent of these activities you laud so extravagantly are gross and unnecessary. People should be made to stay in bed till they have found out something worth doing. Who wants telephones, and cinemas, and safety razors? All that civilization has invented are vulgar luxuries and time-saving devices. And when they have saved the time they don't know what to do with it. All that is required is bread, and wine, and fine linen. I, even I, would not object to getting up for a few hours every week to help to produce these things.'

He stroked the three weeks' growth on his chin, and smiled magnanimously. Then he continued: 'The world has yet to appreciate the real value of passivity. In a crude form the working classes have begun to scratch the edge of the surface. They have discovered the strike. Now, observe that the strike is the most powerful political weapon of the present day. It can accomplish nearly everything it requires, and yet it is a condition of immobility. So you see already that immobility may be more powerful than activity. But this is only the beginning. When the nations start going to bed and stopping there, then civilization will take a leap forward. You can do nothing with a man in bed—not even knock him down. My ambition is to form a league of bedfellows. So that if one day some busybody or group of busybodies says,

"We're going to war with France, or Germany, or America," we can reply, "Very well. Then I'm going to bed." Then, after a time, they would have to go to bed too. And they would eventually succumb to the gentle caresses of these sheets and eiderdowns. All their evil intentions would melt away. The world should be ruled, not by Governments or Soviets, but by national doss-houses.'

He yawned, and I pulled up the blind.

'What about the good activities?' I replied.

For a second I thought I had stumped him, or that he was not going to deign to reply. Then the thin rumble of his voice reached me from across the sheets:—

'What you call the good activities can all be performed in bed. That is to say, they can be substituted by a good immobility. The activities of man are essentially predatory. He has learned nothing and forgotten nothing. He is a hunter and slayer, and nothing else at all. All his activities are diversions of this instinct. Commerce is war, capital is a sword, labor is a stomach. Progress means either filling the stomach, or chopping someone else's head off with the sword. Science is an instrument that speeds up the execution. Politics is a game of fan-tan. Colonization is straightforward daylight robbery.'

'I'm not going to waste my morning with a fool,' I said. 'But what about art, and beauty, and charity, and love?'

'In bed,' he mumbled. 'All in bed. They are all of them spiritual things. Bed is the place for them. Was Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" any finer because he got up and wrote it down, and sent it to a fool of a publisher? Charity! Give a man a bed, and charity ceases to have any significance. You have given him a kingdom. There he may

weave beauty and romance. Love! What a fool you are! Is a bed a less suitable place for love than a County Council tramcar?’

His voice died away above the coverlet. I was about to deliver a vitriolic tirade against his ridiculous theories, but I did not know where to begin, and before I had framed a suitable opening the sound of gentle snoring reached me.

I record this conversation as faithfully as I can recollect, because it will help you to share with me the sense of extreme surprise at certain events which followed, two months later. Of course, George did occasionally get up. Sometimes he went for a gentle stroll in the afternoon, and he belonged to a club downtown where he would go and dine in the evening. After dinner he would watch some of the men play billiards, but he invariably returned to his bed about ten o’clock. He never played any game himself; neither did he, apparently, write or receive letters. Occasionally he read in bed, but he never looked at a newspaper or a magazine. He once said to me that if you read the newspapers you might as well play golf; and the tremulous shiver of disgust in his voice when he uttered the word ‘golf’ is a thing I shall never forget.

I ask you, then, to imagine my amazement when, two months later, George shaved himself, got up to breakfast, reached a City office at nine o’clock, worked all day, and returned at seven in the evening. You will no doubt have a shrewd idea of the reason, and you are right. She was the prettiest little thing you can imagine, with chestnut hair, and a solemn babyish pucker of the lips. She was as vital as he was turgid. Her name was Maisie Brand. I don’t know how he met her, but Maisie, in addition to being pretty and in every way attractive, was a practical

modern child. George’s two hundred a year might be sufficient to keep him in bed, but it was n’t going to be enough to run a household on. Maisie had no use for this bed theory. She was a daughter of sunshine and fresh air, and frocks and theatres, and social life. If George was to win her he must get up in the morning.

On the Sunday after the dramatic change I visited him in his bedroom. He was like a broken man. He groaned when he recognized me.

‘I suppose you’ll stop in bed all day to-day?’ I remarked jauntily.

‘I’ve got to get up this afternoon,’ he growled. ‘I’ve got to take her to a concert.’

‘Well, how do you like work?’ I asked.

‘It’s torture. Agony. It’s awful. Fortunately, I found a fellow sufferer. He works next to me. We take it in turns to have twenty-minute naps, while the other keeps watch.’

I laughed, and quoted: ‘Custom lies upon us with a weight, heavy as frost and deep almost as night.’ Then I added venomously:—

‘Well, I have n’t any sympathy for you. It serves you right for the way you’ve gone on all these years.’

I thought he was asleep again, but at last his drowsy accents proclaimed:—

‘What a perfect fool you are! You always follow the line of least resistance.’

I laughed outright at that, and exclaimed, ‘Well, if ever there was a case of the pot calling the kettle black!’

There was a long interval, during which I seemed to observe a slow, cumbersome movement in the bed. Doubtless he was exploring. When he spoke again there was a faint tinge of animation in his voice:—

‘You are not capable, I suppose, of realizing the danger of it all. You fool!’

Do you think I follow the line of least resistance in bed? Do you think I haven't often wanted to get up and do all these ridiculous things you and your kind indulge in? Can't you see what might happen? Suppose these dormant temptations were thoroughly aroused! My heavens! It's awful to contemplate. Habit, you say? Yes, I know. I know quite well the risk I am running. Am I to sacrifice all the epic romance of this life between the sheets for the sordid round of petty actions you call life? I was a fool to get up that day. I had a premonition of danger when I awoke at dawn. I said to myself, "George, restrain yourself. Do not be deceived by the hollow sunlight. Above all things, keep clear of the park." But, like a fool, I betrayed my sacred trust. The premonitions which come to one in bed are always right. I got up. And now — By jove! It's too late!

Smothered sobs seemed to shake the bed.

'Well,' I said, 'if you feel like that about it, if you think more of your bed than of the girl, I should break it off. She won't be missing much.'

He suddenly sat up and exclaimed: 'Don't you dare —'

Then he sank back on the pillow, and added dispassionately: —

'There, you see already the instinct of activity. A weak attitude. I could crush you more successfully with complete immobility. But these movements are already beginning. They shake me at every turn. Nothing is secure.'

Inwardly chuckling at his discomfiture, I left him.

During the months that followed I did not have opportunities of studying George to the extent that I should have liked, as my work carried me to various parts of the country; but what opportunities I did have I found suf-

ficiently interesting. He certainly improved in health. A slight color tinged his cheeks. He seemed less puffy and turgid. His movements were still slow, but they were more deliberate than of old. His clothes were neat and brushed. The girl was delightful. She came up and chatted with me, and we became great friends. She talked to me quite frankly about George. She laughed about his passion for bed, but declared she meant to knock all that sort of thing out of him. She was going to wake him up thoroughly. She said laughingly that she thought it was perfectly disgusting the way he had been living. I used to try to visualize George making love to her, but somehow the picture would never seem convincing. I do not think it could have been a very passionate affair. Passion was the last thing you would associate with George. I used to watch them walking down the street, the girl slim and vivid, swinging along with broad strides; George, rather flustered and disturbed, pottering along by her side; like a performing bear that is being led away from its bun. He did not appear to look at her, and when she addressed him vivaciously he bent forward his head and held his large ear close to her face. It was as though he were timid of her vitality.

At first the spectacle amused me, but after a time it produced in me another feeling.

'This girl is being thrown away on him. It's horrible. She's much too good for George.' And when I was away I was constantly thinking of her, and dreading the day of the wedding, praying that something would happen to prevent it. But, to my deep concern, nothing did happen to prevent it, and they were duly married in April.

They went for a short honeymoon to Brittany, and then returned and occu-

pied George's old maisonnette below me. The day after their return I had to face a disturbing realization. *I was falling hopelessly in love with Maisie myself.* I could not think of George, or take any interest in him. I was always thinking of her. Her face haunted me. Her charm and beauty, and the pathos of her position, gripped me. I made up my mind that the only thing to do was to go away. I went to Scotland, and on my return took a small flat in another part of London. I wrote to George and gave him my address, and wished him all possible luck. I said I hoped 'some day' to pay them a visit, but if at any time I could be of service would he let me know?

I cannot describe to you the anguish I experienced during the following twelve months. I saw nothing of George or Maisie at all, but the girl was ever present in my thoughts. I could not work. I lived in a state of feverish restlessness. Time and again I was on the point of breaking my resolve, but I managed to keep myself in hand.

It was in the following June that I met Maisie herself, walking down Regent Street. She looked pale and worried. Dark rings encircled her eyes. She gave a little gasp when she saw me, and clutched my hand. I tried to be formal, but she was obviously laboring under some tense emotion.

'My flat is in Baker Street,' I said. 'Will you come and visit me?'

She answered huskily, 'Yes, I will come to-morrow afternoon. Thank you.'

She slipped away in the crowd. I spent a sleepless night. What had happened? Of course, I could see it all. George had gone back to bed. Having once secured her, his efforts had gradually flagged. He had probably left his business — or been sacked — and spent the day sleeping. The poor girl was probably living a life of loneliness

and utter poverty. What was I to do? All day long I paced up and down my flat. I dreaded that she might not come. It was just after four that the bell rang. I hastened to answer it myself. It was she. I led her into the sitting-room and tried to be formal and casual. I made some tea and chatted impersonally about the weather and the news of the day. She hardly answered me. Suddenly she buried her face in her hands and broke into tears. I sprang to her and patted her shoulder.

'There, there!' I said. 'What is it? Tell me all about it, Maisie.'

'I can't live with him. I can't live with him any longer,' she sobbed.

I must acknowledge that my heart gave a violent bump, not entirely occasioned by contrition. I murmured as sympathetically as I could, but with prophetic assurance: —

'He's gone back to bed?'

'Oh, no,' she managed to stammer. 'It's not that. It's just the opposite.'

'Just the opposite!'

'He's so restless, so exhausting. Oh, dear! Yes, please, Mr. Wargrave, give me a cup of tea, and I will tell you all about it.'

For a moment I wondered whether the poor girl's mental balance had been upset. I poured her out the tea in silence. George restless! George exhausting! Whatever did she mean? She sipped the tea meditatively; then she dabbed her beautiful eyes and told me the following remarkable story.

'It was all right at first, Mr. Wargrave. We were quite happy. He was still — you know, very lazy, very sleepy. It all came about gradually. Every week, however, he seemed to get a little more active and vital. He began to sleep shorter hours and work longer. He liked to be entertained in the evening or to go to a theatre. On Sundays he would go for quite long walks. It went on like that for months. Then

they raised his position in the firm. He seemed to open out. It was as though during all those years he had spent in bed he had been hoarding up remarkable stores of energy. And suddenly some demon of restlessness got possession of him. He began to work frenziedly. At first he was pleasant to me; then he became so busy he completely ignored me. At the end of six months they made him manager of a big engineering works at Waltham Green. One of the directors, a Mr. Sturge, said to me one day, "This husband of yours is a remarkable man. He is the most forceful person we have ever employed. What has he been doing all these years? Why have n't we heard of him before?" He would get up at six in the morning, have a cold bath, and study for two hours before he went off to work. He would work all day like a fury. They say he was a perfect slave-driver in the works. Only last week he sacked a man for taking a nap five minutes over his lunch hour. He would get home about eight o'clock, have a hurried dinner, and then insist on going to the opera or playing bridge. When we got back he would read till two or three in the morning. Oh, Mr. Wargrave, he has got worse and worse. He never sleeps at all. He terrifies me. On Sunday it is just the same. He works all the morning. After lunch he motors out to Northwood and plays eighteen holes before tea and eighteen after.'

'What!' I exclaimed. 'Golf!'

'Golf, and science, and organization are his manias. They say he's invented some wonderful labor-saving appliances on the plant, and he's planning all kinds of future activities. The business of the firm is increasing enormously. They pay him well, but he still persists in living in that maisonnette. He says he's too busy to move.'

'Is he cruel to you?'

'If complete indifference and neg-

lect is cruelty, he is most certainly cruel. Sometimes he gives me a most curious look, as though he hated me and yet he can't account for me. He allows me no intimacy of any sort. If I plead with him he does n't answer. I believe he holds me responsible for all these dormant powers which have got loose and which he cannot now control. I do not think his work gives him any satisfaction. It is as though he were driven on by some blind force. Oh, Mr. Wargrave, I can't go on. It is killing me. I must run away and leave him.'

'Maisie,' I murmured, and I took her hand.

The immediate subsequent proceedings are not perhaps entirely necessary to record in relating this story, which is essentially George's story. The story of Maisie and myself could comfortably fill a stout volume, but as it concerns two quite unremarkable people, who were just human and workaday, I do not expect that you would be interested to read it. In any case, we have no intention of writing it, so do not be alarmed.

I can only tell you that during that year of her surprising married life Maisie had thought of me not a little, and this dénouement rapidly brought things to a head. After this confession we used to meet every day. We went for rambles, and picnics, and to matinées; and, of course, that kind of thing cannot go on indefinitely. We both detested the idea of an intrigue. And eventually we decided that we would cut the Gordian knot and make a full confession. Maisie left him and went to live with a married sister.

That same morning I called on George. I arrived at the maisonnette just before six o'clock, as I knew that that was the most likely time to catch him. Without any preliminary ceremony I

made my way into the familiar bedroom. George was in bed. I stood by the door and called out to him loudly: 'George!'

Like a flash he was out of bed and standing in his pyjamas, facing me. He had changed considerably. His face was lined and old, but his eyes blazed with a fury of activity. He awed me. I stammered out my confession.

'George, I'm awfully sorry, old chap. I have a confession to make to you. It comes in the first place from Maisie. She has decided that she cannot live with you any longer. She thinks you have neglected her and treated her badly. She refuses to come back to you under any circumstances. Indeed, she — she and I — er —'

I tailed off dismally, and looked at him. For a moment I thought he was going to bear down on me. I know that if he had I should have been supine. I should have stood there and let him

slaughter me. I felt completely overpowered by the force of his personality. I believe I shivered. He hovered by the edge of the bed, then he turned and looked out of the window. He stood there solemnly for nearly a minute, then he emitted a profound sigh. Without more ado he got back into bed. There was an immense upheaval of the sheets. He seemed to be burrowing down into some vast and as yet unexplored cave of comfort. He rolled and heaved, and at length became inert. I stood there, waiting for my answer. Sparrows twittered outside on the window box. I don't know how long I waited. I felt that I could not go until he had spoken.

At length his voice came. 'It seemed to reach me across dim centuries of memory, an old, tired, cosy, enormously contented, sleep-encrusted voice: —

'S'll right,' said the voice. 'Tell Mrs. Chase she need n't bring up my shaving water this morning.'